

Pictured Politics: Visualizing Colonial History in South American Civic Portrait Collections

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Abstract

This presentation addresses the history of institutional art collecting in Spanish colonial South America. In viceregal South America, political changes inspired adjustments to pictorial convention in portraits, imbuing portraiture with a previously unutilized social relevance in the negotiation of history, authority, and political relationships. My study of the material remains of colonial history suggests that collected artworks contributed to the maintenance of repressive social hierarchies which remain politically influential into the present.

Because individuals and institutions were consistently grappling for effective power and local authority, painted portraits participated in the visualization of the history of the vicerealties from an internal perspective. Through the lens of official portrait collections in three prominent South American capitals, Lima, Buenos Aires, and Bogotá, this presentation considers how works of art were active components in the construction of American colonial histories and political relationships. Official portraits in particular were introduced into civic politics early in the sixteenth century when local and international bureaucrats used the images to establish or create the illusion of political alliances. Viceregal portraits were later recontextualized in civic spaces where they were exhibited for their historic value, documenting the socio-political past of South American regions.